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Meese Attacks Reporters' Use of Leaks but Sees Wiretaps as Unlikely

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Presidential counselor Edwin Meese III said yesterday he doubted the Reagan administration would ever authorize wiretaps to trace leaks of classified information, but he condemned reporters who use leaked information as behaving like receivers of stolen property.

Meese said it is just as wrong for journalists to make use of leaked secrets as it is for government employees to leak classified documents.

Such a journalist is like a fence, Meese said. "He's equally guilty." Responding to a question on "Meet the Press" (NBC, WRC), Meese described a leaker as a person "who is betraying his country."

He said the Reagan administration has not authorized any wiretaps to track down leaks, however, and "I seriously doubt that we would."

Meese and White House chief of staff James A. Baker III appeared on television talk shows yesterday as the White House opened its latest campaign to win congressional approval of the president's tax cut package. Both were asked about a number of non-tax issues, including the withdrawal of Ernest W. Lefever, President Reagan's choice to be the administration's chief adviser on human rights.

The two differed in emphasis when answering whether Reagan would now

abolish the human rights job in the State Department. Lefever withdrew after the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted against his nomination 13 to 4.

"I think the president will probably move slowly to come up with another nominee," Baker said on "Face the Nation" (CBS, WDM).

He called attention to a suggestion by Senate Majority Leader Howard H. Baker Jr. (Tenn.) that the human rights post might better be abolished because it is "a subjective post." The chief of staff said that consideration combined with Reagan's disappointment over Lefever would lead him to move very slowly in finding another nominee.

Meese said only that no decision had been made along the line of abolishing the post.

Meese said neither Reagan nor his top advisers had any second thoughts about their decision, after being informed by Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Charles H. Percy (Ill.) that Lefever's nomination was in trouble and should be withdrawn, to throw the president's full support behind the embattled nominee.

Baker praised Percy although the committee chairman played a major role in blocking Lefever.

Despite the disagreement over Lefever, Baker said, the White House is pleased with most of Percy's actions. Percy, he added, "has done a good job

in running the Foreign Relations Committee."

Baker did not mention that the White House was angry enough about Percy's opposition to Lefever to try to pressure him by putting a hold on the senator's candidate to be U.S. attorney for northern Illinois.

On another subject, Meese defended Michael Reagan. He insisted that the president's son "in no way was trying improperly to use the name of the president."

"He did nothing wrong," Meese said of the younger Reagan, who wrote letters to military installations on behalf of a potential supplier he represented and mentioned his father's name.

The president's counselor reacted sharply to House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill's charge yesterday on "Issues and Answers" (ABC, WJLA) that the president and his wealthy inner circle are insensitive to the problems of working people. O'Neill said Reagan "has very, very selfish people around him."

"He knows and we know that that's absolutely untrue," Meese said.

He also rejected questions which suggested the administration has no policy toward the Soviet Union. The Reagan administration, he said, will "seek to control and halt Soviet expansionism throughout the world" while standing ready to talk about "meaningful" arms control.